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Interview with Arthur Brody

Founder and CEO, Brodart

by Katina Strauch (Editor, *Against the Grain*)

Arthur Brody is a legend. He's the man who started Brodart many years ago in Newark, NJ. In 1960 it was moved to Williamsport, PA. Today, Brodart is a thriving million dollar company. Its robust, energetic, and full of ideas founder, Arthur Brody, moves from PA, to California, to New York in the same day. We met in Kennedy International Airport and here is how the conversation went. — KS

ATG: A lot has already been written about you and the history of Brodart since the company recently had a fiftieth anniversary. Can we review it for our readers? I know that you started your company in 1939 and that you started with book covers when you were in college at Columbia University.

AB: Yes. I started out with the idea of protecting my textbooks to make them more saleable. One day when I was covering my textbooks with brown paper, it occurred to me that I could make book covers out of clear plastic film instead of paper.

In high school I was a serious amateur photographer and owned a large view camera. I washed the emulsions off some of the used film and made clear plastic book covers. When other students saw them, they wanted to know where I got them. I, of course, told them that I made them, and in view of the fact that this was 1939 and things were rough, I offered to make and sell these plastic textbook covers, which I did successfully.

Further, my dad was a pharmacist, and he had a lending library in his store. I reasoned that if these covers protected textbooks, that possibly they would protect the lending library books. My new business exploded much more than I anticipated. Before the end of my first year of business, when I was 19 years old, I had six people working for me.

I developed a machine from an old Sears Roebuck washing machine ringer so that I was able to manufacture covers from rolls of plastic film much more efficiently than by hand. Unfortunately, because World War II was getting started, I was having trouble getting materials for book covers. I was able to get materials to manufacture blueprint protectors. And, because these protectors



were being used by the defense industries, I was considered "critical" and deferred from military service. In 1942, despite my deferment, I decided to enlist and became an officer in the Signal Corps.

I got married in 1943, while I was still in the service, to a young school teacher to whom I am still married; and while on leave in 1945, I started the company again and my wife ran it until I got out of the service in 1946. Our only products were plastic book covers and book jacket covers, selling primarily to commercial lending libraries, chain libraries and bookstores. We used the trade name Plasti-Kleer.

The assistant librarian at **New York Public Library** was a fellow by the name of **Francis St. John**. He wanted to dress up the library after World War II — to increase circulation — so he got the bright idea of putting the Plasti-Kleer book jacket covers on the books to glamorize them. People felt that if the jacket was still on the book, it was a new book (back in those days the jacket was discarded after the first few circulations). So he ordered 10,000 covers from us, which at that time was an enormous order.

About six months after New York Public started to use the covers, they discovered that they actually protected and preserved the books — the books with the covers on them lasted a lot longer than the same books

that were uncovered. The library decided to use them on every single circulating book, which was an enormous order for us. St. John suggested — I think it was 1946 — that I attend the Buffalo ALA convention. I did, though I really didn't want to market products. I wanted to develop other new products, but I couldn't find any company interested in selling our book covers. We decided to sell directly to our customers and we developed additional products such as magazine covers, and various types of adhesives and tapes.

ATG: I'm interested in your statement that you didn't want to market the products, you wanted to make them. What was your training?

AB: I was trained as an engineer, and I really wanted to create and develop many more products. We ended up doing that, and I found that once I got into it, I really enjoyed marketing. It was an interesting time.

To give you a little background: At the time, the number one company in library and furniture supplies was **Remington Rand** — they had purchased **Library Bureau**. Many years ago the company was started by **Melville Dewey**, who, of course, started the Dewey Decimal system and, by the way, he was a shrewd business man. Because of his knowledge of the decimal system, he made catalog cards (7 1/2 by 12 1/2 centimeters), which is just slightly smaller than a 3 x 5 card. Then he manufactured the drawers for his catalog cards so that they wouldn't take the larger 3 x 5 cards. He, of course, sold the catalog cards as well as the catalog card cabinets. I understand that Jim Rand was apparently enamored with the Library Bureau and purchased it for Remington Rand Corporation and thus became the major supplier of just about everything for libraries. Unfortunately, they have recently gone out of business.

Brodart grew and continued to develop and manufacture new library and school supplies. We went into printing, developed glue to replace library paste and developed a plastic spray to replace shellac. In conjunction with the **3M Company**, we developed pressure sensitive tape that would not shrink or bleed through. We also started to print tapes and labels for putting call numbers and symbols on books. Even though we did manufacture some supplies for the office supply and photographic market, we concentrated primarily on the library supply market.

In 1954 a New York firm called **Library Efficiency Corporation** got into serious financial trouble and went bankrupt. The company had been started around 1920 to sell a circulation system called **Dickman Book**

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Charging System. It was first used in Washington, D.C. and was the first circulation system based on an embossed charge-a-plate. They also manufactured some library supplies as well as furniture.

Newark Public Library was still using their system and at the urging of **Ned Bryant**, then head of Newark Public, we bought Library Bureau so that they and other libraries who were still using the Dickman system would still have a source of supply. It became obvious that the Dickman system was obsolete and had to be replaced and thus we developed two entirely new concepts. One was called **Brodac**, which was a copying system for circulation control. The last Brodac was just taken out of service. The first system was installed in **Miami Public Library** over 30 years ago. We also developed another system called **Sysdac**, which is still in existence. The system puts a piece of tape on book cards, which identifies the borrower, date due, etc.

We also developed a data card circulation system, but we decided to take it off the market once computers became a viable alternative; and though we stayed out of the market for computerized systems many years, we recently have introduced a system called Precision One Integrated System.

ATG: *So how did you come to get involved with books and bookselling and the cataloging and processing of books?*

AB: It was quite accidental. A librarian by the name of **Bertha Hellum**, who I had known when she was in **Brooklyn Public Library**, had become the head librarian of the Contra Costa County California Library. I noticed that her library suddenly started to use an enormous amount of library supplies.

I visited her in California to find out what was going on, and she showed me a cataloging and processing production line whereby they were able to efficiently centrally catalog and process books instead of each branch across the county doing it individually. I thought it was a great idea and suggested she ought to commercialize it. She didn't want to do that and suggested that we do it with her blessing, but it seemed to me that the company to do it should be in the book distributing business. At the time that was not one of our operations; therefore, I spoke to **American News Company**, **Baker & Taylor**, **McClurgs** and other large book distributors, but no one seemed interested so we dropped it.

In the sixties, as a result of the Aid to Education Act, Wenatchee, WA received a grant through the state library to establish a 30,000 book library within six months. They did not have the staff or wherewithal to do it. The then state librarian, **Marian Reynolds**, recalled some informal discussions with me at an ALA Midwinter meeting about centralized cataloging and processing, so she called me to see if we would

be willing to undertake a contract to supply and catalog and process the 30,000 books. After long negotiations we agreed to do it, but didn't want to use the Brodart name so we set up a separate small company and named it **Alanar Book Processing Company**.

ATG: *So Alanar became one of the first companies doing outsourcing. What happened?*

AB: We lost our shirt. We set **Alanar** up in Newark with a separate address from Brodart. We hired staff including two professional librarians and cataloged and processed the books, which were ordered by the **Wentworth County, WA** librarians from their usual sources, which included the major book distributors, as well as a number of publishers. The controls that were set up to be sure that we received the books the libraries ordered and paid for were most inadequate. Even though we did complete the contract on time, and if I remember, we charged \$1.35 per book, it cost us two to three times that amount, and when the contract was completed, we discontinued the operation.

ATG: *But you did set it up again. How did that come about?*

AB: At the next Midwinter meeting in Chicago word got out about the Alanar contract and a number of librarians expressed an interest in seeing such a process continue. By the way, the Midwinter ALA meetings were quite different back then — it was always at the old Edgewater Beach Hotel with no exhibits and where librarians, publishers, authors and library suppliers could sit and talk about mostly concepts and ideas.

As a side note, **Ralph Shaw**, who in my opinion was a creative and brilliant librarian, was Dean of Rutgers Library School and then a number of years later became Dean of the Library School in Hawaii. Ralph was a very unusual man and we became good friends. From the time he arrived at the meeting until he left, he played poker 24 hours a day, but during those games the talk was about libraries. Ralph persuaded me to reconsider our position and thus we decided to continue cataloging and processing. To help solve the control problem we bought a small book distributor called **Unidoc** and set up a new division called **Brodart Books**.

It was just about that time that we moved some of our operations from Newark, New Jersey to Williamsport, PA. We made arrangements with the **Library of Congress** to supply cards with books and so we were able to offer books just the way any other distributor could, but we also offered books with LC cards or books completely cataloged and processed.

ATG: *And your market was mainly public, state and school libraries? How about the academic library market?*

AB: When we first started to do this cataloging and processing, we were doing it for

public libraries, elementary schools and some junior colleges. Most colleges and universities were not particularly interested. We did supply books and LC cards to some of them, but usually not complete cataloging and processing.

About 30 years ago when the **University of California** set up the new campus program, it was headquartered in San Diego at what was going to be UCSD. At the time it was empty land. They selected approximately 50,000 titles. Unfortunately, no one bothered to cross check the various disciplines, so it was not unusual to get orders for nine copies of the same title, sometimes more. We supplied most of the books and a good deal of the furniture that went into that library and two other new university libraries. Every book we supplied had a call number on a heat sensitive call number label that we helped to develop and a complete set of LC cards. We supplied all the books with the exception of the scientific, technical and medical books, which were supplied by a firm from San Francisco called **Stacey**. We bought Stacey a few years later. We still have bookstores in San Francisco and Palo Alto and recently opened a store in Cupertino.

We continued to grow despite the fact that some of the other book distributors started to also catalog and process books. As we and libraries became more computerized, we started supplying more and more computer services and thus eliminated much individual typing. Nowadays, practically everything is computer generated and printed, and we are in a much better position to effectively customize even the most complicated college and university specifications. Therefore, our expansion in recent years has been towards the higher level libraries.

Many libraries, schools, colleges and universities have used us for the opening day collections, whereby we will do all the cataloging and processing of books, store the books until the library is ready to open and ship them when required.

ATG: *I read somewhere that you predicted a book on the chip (electronic book) ten years ago. I got all excited when I bought *Jurassic Park* on CD-ROM several years ago and read the inspiring introduction by *Michael Crichton*. I read two pages then bought the paperback.*

AB: The book on a chip (electronic book) is great for looking up a piece of information. But reading from them is very tiring and not comfortable. I was not suggesting that the chip was going to replace the printed book, but I was suggesting that the technology was and is there to do so. However, until such time as reading the printed word on a screen is as comfortable and convenient as reading the printed word on a piece of paper, the book as we know it will continue to survive. Though I do believe that reading such things as the phone book listings, bibliographic information — look-up type reading — is very viable on screens, but continued reading is not.

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ATG: Another area that you've shown a lot of interest in is weeding books.

AB: Yes, though libraries have a prime mission to give service and you can't measure everything in relation to cost effectiveness. There are certain books, serials and other media, etc. that you have to have even if they are rarely used. I believe it's true, that less than 10 percent of the collection makes up better than 90 percent of the circulation and, therefore, lack of culling is a very serious problem. First of all, space gets more and more expensive, and then there's maintenance of the collection. Surely there can be more cooperation among libraries as to what has to be available. There's a difference when someone comes in and wants a current book, you probably should have it available for them, but if it's a book that's been out-of-print for a number of years, or is rarely requested, it would not be a tragedy if someone had to wait a few days until such a request is fulfilled. In many cases different libraries in close proximity to each other continue to maintain the same unused materials. It seems to me that areawide cooperative weeding would make a lot of sense.

ATG: I wondered if you would say anything about the future and how your company has survived for 57 years. All these years you've been successful at predicting the future to a certain extent.

AB: As I said before, our ability to listen, to observe and to keep an open and inquiring mind is very important. Wisdom and experience must temper any predictions for the future. I believe that the printed book will continue for the most part in the present form, not only in my lifetime and my children's life time, but in my grandchildren's life time. I can remember back some fifty years ago when paperbacks first became popular, it was predicted that for the most part hardbacks would become obsolete. We worried a great deal about that because our biggest selling book cover was for hardbacks. Though we also made them for paperbacks, they were not as effective. Paperbacks have certainly had an effect on the publishing companies, but we still have hardback books. However, as I said before, I believe certain types of information — bibliographic lists, and short reading reference material will indeed be more effectively used on computer, Internet, CD-ROM, etc.

Not too long ago a company was established to transmit books directly to a library via satellite and indeed some are being transmitted now via Internet. Such methods would eliminate the need for a book on a chip, but doesn't solve the problem of readability.

Printing books on demand is increasing, and I think it's going to have a major effect on the industry. With computers and automation it's feasible to print smaller and smaller quantities and turn out a good product and everybody can be his or her own publisher. I'm not sure if the total result will be good or bad. Is it going to mean a lot

more material is going to get published? Of course, there are an awful lot of things that get published that maybe shouldn't get published. It may become so simple and inexpensive to publish it, just like in cases of CD-ROM, it's relatively inexpensive to produce CD-ROMs. There is something about the creativity of publishing and becoming published that appeals to many creative people. People like to write. And if they can't get a publisher to do it, there's a surplus of vanity presses, and it now makes it much easier and less expensive, so there may be a lot more books. I think the negative side is that some books shouldn't have been published in the first place. On the more positive side though, I can envision the day that a publisher will be able to publish a book and when affordable equipment will exist that will enable a library to print a book on demand creating excellent copy on both sides of the page and automatically collate it, fold and bind it into a usable book. Such equipment actually exists today, but at the moment is too expensive for the library budget.

I believe the next step in this process will probably be regional book manufacturing plants just as a number of daily newspapers are published simultaneously in a number of plants across the country. I believe it is feasible that book publishing can go the same route. But, no matter what the future brings, I feel certain that **Brodart** will adjust and continue to fill the needs of future libraries and librarians just as we have in the past.

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